

Rhodes Past and Present: A Critical and Personal Assessment

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Approaching a topic such as the critical tradition and its history at Rhodes University in present-day South Africa is not easy for someone in my position, for what seems to be a common view, that Rhodes is and always has been a liberal university in the broad sense of that term, is a view which is at odds with my own experience. The most that can be said is that Rhodes, in the early days of apartheid, only reluctantly and when there seemed to be no alternative, condemned the policy of apartheid education as first enunciated and subsequently implemented by Dr. Verwoerd's National Party government. Academic staff who continued publicly to voice their opposition were frowned upon, as I soon discovered.

I had come at the beginning of 1960, from the University College of Fort Hare, then a constituent college of Rhodes, from which, together with seven others staff members, I had been sacked, 'for undermining apartheid' according to the Minister of Bantu Education. I was invited to replace Alan Slee, who had run politics at Rhodes, when he resigned to take up a position in what was then Tanganyika.

The Department of which I became a member, the Philosophy Department, was headed by that remarkable figure, Professor Daantjie Oosthuizen, whom I was privileged to work with for nine years. He certainly put Rhodes on the map as far as philosophy was concerned, and the Department fast earned a reputation for its tough critical and analytic approach. Far from attempting to evangelise, propagandise or convert students to any particular viewpoint or creed, the department was concerned to develop their critical and analytical abilities. It was undoubtedly the best Philosophy Department in the country, a position which I think it still holds. At the same time Daantjie was a self-effacing, modest and gentle person who served as an inspiration to generations of students. Upon my arrival, Politics became a sub-department of Philosophy.

Fort Hare had been deeply divided between those who supported the education policies of the National Party government, and the so-called liberals who opposed those policies. I identified with the latter. From my first arrival at Rhodes I was treated as a subversive by certain senior members of the academic staff, a fact brought home to me by students, complete strangers to me, who came to inform me that I was being maligned in the lectures by at least one

senior academic, being labeled as ‘a communist and atheist’ intent upon converting students to my supposed views. This was not pleasant, and I did my best to ignore it.

There were several other members of the academic staff – liberals in the broad sense, who made plain their opposition to government policy – and in Senate and the Board of the Faculty of Arts we were lumped together as members of what they called ‘the Afro-Asian bloc’. We tended to laugh at this label, and to joke about it on the occasions when it was mentioned. but we resented being labeled at all. Politics, then a sub-department of Philosophy, was only given representation on the Board of the Faculty of Social Science years after my arrival at Rhodes, (I forget the exact year), and there was little doubt that the prime reason for this un-academic stance was political.

What is more, I later became aware that reports were being regularly transmitted to the Vice-Chancellor alleging various actions on my part designed to subvert the university. These reports were entirely false, and rather upsetting, for I could do nothing but grin and bear it, my informant being no less a person than the Vice-Principal at the time, Professor Rob Antonissen. But matters had drawn to a head prior to this, with the decision of Senate and Council to award an honorary degree to the then State President, C. R. Swart. Many of us were aghast at the very idea, especially as Swart had played no small part in the implementation of apartheid in education, including tertiary education. The response among academic staff in general was one of apathy and even fear when it came to voicing opposition.

This kind of toadying was anathema to the so-called Afro-Asian bloc, and three of us drew up a petition of protest and collected signatures from among the academic staff. We managed to get only 26 signatures in all, only two of whom were members of the Senate, these being Professor Ewer, Head of Zoology, and I, who was on Senate as acting head of Philosophy while Professor Oosthuizen was abroad on sabbatical leave. Professor Ewer also happened to be on leave, and so did not attend the Senate meeting at which I was treated as a kind of coconut-shy being attacked from all sides. It was not an enjoyable experience, for no-one spoke up on my behalf. When the Council met, they sent letters of condemnation to each of the signatories.

No thought appeared to be given to the fact that they were honoring a person who had been a senior member of the Cabinet, and who not only rejected everything that the university professed to stand for, but had been instrumental in subverting the educational system in South Africa in general. Several years later a senior member of Senate went so far as to blame me for the failure of the Rhodes branch in Port Elizabeth, citing the petition as the main cause of this, and making it clear that he was not alone in this belief.

One of the consequences of the Swart degree was the resignation of the Chancellor of Rhodes University, Sir Basil Schonland, who was utterly shocked by the whole affair. Out of consideration to the then Vice-Chancellor,

Dr. Thomas Alty, he left it to him to decide whether or not to make it public. Dr. Alty chose not to make it public, and Rhodes has sat with this skeleton in its cupboard ever since. Although the affair was made public recently by Brian Austen in his autobiography of Schonland, few people have read it, so it has remained generally unknown.

I might also mention that I had discussed with Professor Oosthuizen prior to his proceeding on sabbatical, a proposal to change Politics from a two to a three year major, and to this he readily agreed. Upon presenting this proposal to the Board of the Faculty of Arts, I was asked if Professor Oosthuizen had agreed to the changes. Upon my confirming that he had, I was asked if I had this in writing. As I did not, the proposal was turned down. You can imagine how I felt about this. The change was for this reason delayed by a year.

Then there was the Basil Moore case, in which Basil Moore was denied an academic position for political reasons, and somewhat later and less well known was my own case, which resulted in my having to wait ten years after the first recommendation by Senate before being appointed to the chair of Political Studies. These cases were largely due to the practice of Council, on which Government appointees were prominent, to interfere with matters academic, and to reverse academic and, possibly, other decisions made by Senate. None of this reflects very well upon Rhodes University, and I do not propose to dwell upon the subject.

That said Rhodes was in many ways a very much more lively place than it is now. There were regular evening meetings in the General Lecture Theatre, often addressed by members of the academic staff and by visiting academics, nearly all of which were well attended by students and staff alike. There was an active debating society, an amateur dramatic society, an annual Arts and Science Week, and an annual 'Kaif night', as it was called, which, when I first arrived, took the form of a staged musical composed and written by junior members of the academic staff. And they really were excellent. In this way a strong cultural life was very much a feature of Rhodes. And I think we are much the poorer for it as a result of its demise. So while Rhodes had its political down-side it had a cultural vibrancy which it now most decidedly lacks.

My own experience was radically affected when in 1963 I was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. The main reason for this was that, together with three other members of the then Liberal Party, one of whom was the Rhodes historian Dr. Clem Goodfellow, we collected information on police brutality in Umtata at the request of Defence and Aid., which resulted in our spending a week detained in Umtata gaol. I was advised not to use the Senior Common Room during morning and afternoon tea, and was restricted from being in the company of more than one other person at any time. Only my lectures and tutorials were exempt from this restriction. In addition I was under the constant surveillance of the Security Police, who used frequently to park in the street outside my place of residence for hours on end.

In 1964, three Rhodes academics were detained under the Terrorism Act and were flown to Cape Town, where they were interrogated, and, after three weeks two of them, of whom I was one, were released, and the third somewhat later. No charges were laid against any of us, and, far as I know, the University simply ignored the matter.

In 1964 Norman Bromberger of the Economics Department, was also banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, and the following year Eric Harber became the third victim. As far as I can remember, the University carried on as if nothing had happened. Unlike the other three English-speaking universities, protests were relatively rare at Rhodes, although the students certainly protested more frequently than did the staff. This was, of course, partly due to Rhodes being far from the large cities and hence relatively isolated, but it was also an indication that Rhodes was not as politically liberal as Wits, Cape Town or Natal. I have not forgotten however that it was due to the efforts of Dr. Hyslop, the Vice-Chancellor, that Norman Bromberger and I had our banning orders lifted. Eric Harber had already left for the United Kingdom.

On the credit side too, it should not be forgotten that under Derek Henderson, Rhodes began quietly and without any fuss to place black students in the residences. Technically this was against the law, and was thus a bold and very significant step in the right direction. Rhodes was the only university at this time to take such a step.

A new threat to the universities came in the form of the admission of students from schools administered under Bantu Education. This development brought about fundamental changes in the universities, as they were now expected to perform a function for which they were neither suited nor designed, for many students had not been educated up to the standards required for university entrance. Instead of the government creating 'bridging colleges', university academics were expected to do the job of bridging, which meant that their attention was to a significant extent diverted from the purposes for which they had originally been appointed. One of the consequences was a general lowering of standards of pass marks, despite the often spirited denials by university authorities. While it is arguable that the standards of first class passes were largely maintained, this was far from the case at the lower end of the results spectrum. Many students who could only be described as semi-literate were awarded degrees. This development, added to the fact that the regulations governing curricula had over the years been steadily relaxed, may be said to be part of the 'dumbing down' process which also became a phenomenon in both the United States and the United Kingdom. When I first came to the Eastern Cape, both Rhodes and Fort Hare required students to pass both their final year major subjects together, and the regulations governing degrees generally relaxed, as for example in the introduction of 'write-offs'. There were no supplementary examinations except where a person needed only one subject to complete the degree.

The consequences of these developments are evident in the media, where spelling and grammar often leave a great deal to be desired, and where malapropisms have become commonplace. One continues to receive semi-literate letters from government departments and the private sector alike. This is now true of graduates from every kind of background, first language speakers as well as second language speakers. It is interesting to note that in the 1950s the overwhelming majority of students were literate and it was not possible to distinguish between Fort Hare and Rhodes students by their standard of written English or their literacy, let alone their academic prowess. This statement is based upon examination scripts, for both institutions wrote the same papers when Fort Hare was a constituent college of Rhodes University. Bantu Education was largely responsible for the damage done, damage which for many reasons now seems to be spread across the student population, and which will take many years to repair.

In the last decade or two, the status of academics has been in decline, and salaries relative to those of executives in government departments have decreased over the years as well as relative to those of the senior members of university bureaucracies. That Professor Caroline White of the University of Natal was dismissed for *insubordination*, normally a *military offence*, is a case in point. She was supposedly insubordinate to a bureaucrat for taking a stand upon an academic matter. There has been increasing interference mainly by the state bureaucracies into academic departments with consequent demands upon academic staff, burdening them with ever more and new responsibilities, while diminishing their powers and their authority. An example of a Head of Department being bypassed at Rhodes is illustrated in the case of an academic brought before a disciplinary committee, with the Head of Department being simply informed and then sidelined from the disciplinary process. It is imperative that every attempt to place bureaucrats in authority over academics ought to be resisted. For academics know best about academic matters.

In a lecture delivered to NUSAS many years ago, Sir Eric Ashby, then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, maintained that universities founded in the 19th Century in Britain, were intended to be democratic in structure, but the first appointees, who formed the first Senates, saw to it that future appointments were to posts subordinate to their own. In South Africa, as far as I know, Universities were founded on the Scottish model, and democratic practices insofar as they exist have had to be hard fought for. When I first came to Rhodes, for example, only Heads of Departments and sub-departments were members of faculty boards, and it took a long and tough fight before the boards were reformed.

Of all the institutions apart from those which are patently political, universities can be considered to be foremost among those which ought to be democratic from top to bottom. The history of universities in Europe begins with the identification of informal 'communities of scholars', which were

communities of equals, for all were there for the same purpose, that of learning. Universities are still to this day communities of scholars, and the most rational way in which to organise such communities is to adopt democratic principles and practices.

The only university in modern times that I know of which broadly follows these principles is the University of Oxford, which has a federal structure of different colleges which are run by the academic fellows who comprise them. Each college has a head elected by the fellows, who is *primus inter pares*. The college administrators are subordinate to the academics, by whom they are employed. The heads of the colleges form the Hebdomadal council which legislates for the university as a whole. But any decision which it makes can be challenged by college members, who, if they can get a certain number of signatures, can call for a vote on the matter in which all academics can participate, so that it is possible for the decision to be overturned. It is quite common for people who extol the virtues of democracy to fight tooth and nail to prevent its introduction in almost all cases where it is not practised and where it is suggested as a reform.

I would argue that South African universities are in a sense inverted institutions in that academics are subordinate to the administrators, with the result that they cannot in principle have the kind of authority and independence which they would have were the relationship to be reversed.

Universities are now faced with the change from *education* to *training* with all that, that means. It is a change which is gradually making nonsense of the very idea of academic freedom which is as a consequence becoming irrelevant. Gradually the traditional academic subjects are being whittled away and the emphasis is now upon career-oriented subjects. While Rhodes has fought valiantly against this trend of scrapping many of the traditional Arts subjects, it has nevertheless been forced to amalgamate Classics and the language departments, apart from English, into one department under one head. Divinity has been scrapped altogether with music the latest to come under threat, but given the policies of the Department of Education under successive Ministers, it is a war of attrition, and it will not be very long before the universities will have completed the transformation to training centres or, if you like, technikons. The problem is that funds are simply not available in any quantity for subjects which are not career-oriented.

It might be mentioned at this point that the change from education to training at university level is not a necessity, for in countries such as the United Kingdom many firms require employees with a good degree and are not concerned with the subject studied, for they are interested in persons with developed analytical and critical skills. They have in-house training to prepare the employee for whatever tasks they require to be done.

At this point I ought to say something about the distinction I have made between 'education' and 'training'. The notion of education was developed by

the 'classical' Greeks who thought of education as involving the full development of the individual, which is to say to developing people to the maximum of their capacities, a point stressed in modern times by Idealist philosophers in particular. Knowledge was assumed to be an intrinsic good. The aim then was the development of the individual, with the adage 'Know thyself' as a *sine qua non* of the educational process. Education was intended to produce fully developed, well-integrated, balanced and complete people.

This is in stark contrast with the aims of education in South Africa today where education is thought of in either means/ends terms, which is to say, instrumentally, or alternatively in functional terms. In both cases individuals are treated as means only and not as ends in themselves, worthy of respect. People are trained to fill roles in order to achieve certain economic and social ends, and the system of education is designed to fulfill this function. In this way individuals are like cogs in machines. The possibility that such a system will produce Philistines seems not even to have been entertained by the powers that be.

Universities are consequently under increasing pressure both to provide persons suitably trained to enter industry and commerce and, given an economic system in which profits are the be-all and end-all of existence, it is not surprising that universities have become much more 'business oriented', as in fact the new terminology reveals, gradually extending the process of commercialisation of tertiary education. Depending as they do ever more upon commerce and industry for funds, the universities are becoming 'business oriented' institutions. Students are now often referred to as 'customers', and the universities have administrative departments dedicated to fund-raising and the 'marketing' of the university. 'Marketing' is a term now *de rigueur* within our universities, and the influence of 'big business' has become ever more evident. The world within which universities exist has changed greatly over the past decades, with new and extremely ominous threats presenting themselves.

We seem now to be facing, or soon about to have to face, the kind of dilemma the University of Warwick confronted in the late 1960s, of which one outcome was the publication of *Warwick University Limited*, a critical book edited by the eminent historian, the late E.P. Thompson. For in the late 1960s, business interests began to threaten the independence of Warwick University. Since then there has been added, mainly during the Thatcher years, ever more demands and restrictions upon academics which are given force by the ways in which universities are funded.

Summing up the Warwick study E.P. Thompson wrote:

It is a question of adjusting the proper area of an institution's self-determination and control by its own members in relation to that proper area in which society's demands and needs can be indicated. But once we have reached this point, the argument becomes infinitely more complex, because there is not, of course, in Britain *one* 'public' {this is even more true in South Africa}, but many different demands, needs and values. Hence, to

respond to social demands does not mean to respond instantaneously to one particular indicator of demands – government policy or the policies of senior industrialists – but to take part, at many different levels in society, in the argument between differing indices of social priority. A university must leave itself the freedom actively to seek out social needs which have not, as yet, percolated to the level of government or which may not coincide with the needs of industrialists; and if links are to be forged there is also the need (as one Warwick student argued) for links to be made between ‘the subversives in the University and the subversives in society. What is at issue here is not just the government of one university, but the whole way in which a society selects its priorities and orders itself.

Compounding this change from education to training, this subordination of education to economics, is the trend to globalisation, which is driven by the huge multi-national or global oligopolies which now dominate the economies of the developed world, and which not only dominate but threaten, the economies of the underdeveloped Third World. In the First World their influence upon universities is greatly to be feared, for the financial support which they render to the universities is not without strings attached, strings which undermine not only academic freedom but the moral integrity of these institutions, a development first noted in Warwick University Limited.

In a recent article (*Mail and Guardian*, February 27 to March 4, 2004) George Monbiot points out that increasingly, in the United States, the President has sought to suppress academic studies in which results conflict with business interests, and that often conflicts of interests were not disclosed by researchers who were supported by funds from big business. Monbiot points out that in 2002 *The Guardian* revealed that British and American scientists are putting their names to papers they have not written, papers which were ‘ghosted’ by employees of drug companies. He went on to state that ‘There is more corruption in our university faculties than there is in the transport industry’, and while not providing evidence for this extraordinary allegation, the fact is that there certainly *is* corruption in the universities. While this might not as yet be true of South African universities, it is obviously an ominous development, against which precautions need to be taken.

Former Rhodian, Margaret Legum, in her recent book *It doesn't have to be like this: A New Economy for South Africa and the World*, writes (p.109), ‘In 1996 Sheldon Krinsky examined 789 articles published by 1105 researchers in 14 leading life science and biomedical journals. In 34 percent of the articles one or more of the authors had an identifiable financial interest connected to the research. Researchers in the mid-1990s found that more than 3,000 researchers had financial ties to corporations. Some 20 percent admitted that they had delayed publication of adverse results to allow patents to be obtained. The authors conclude that “the behavior of universities and scientists is sad, shocking and frightening... They are seduced by industry funding, and frightened that if we don't go along with these gag orders, the money will go to less rigorous institutions”’.

The magnitude of the threat is quite intimidating, and I think it is safe to say that the further subordination of universities to economic demands will steadily continue until present globalisation policies are replaced by policies which maximise opportunities for local development with local authorities able to act independently of the demands of global economic institutions. But it will require more than that, it will require a return to the granting of maximum respect to individuals, and with it education policies which treat human beings as ends in themselves and not as means only.

I should like to focus for a few minutes on what have been, for me, some of the problematic aspects which are to be found in the disciplines of philosophy and the social sciences. The first one is the propensity of academics to be unduly critical of the works of writers from other traditions and writers whom they consider to be revolutionaries or who go against what might be termed 'mainstream beliefs'. Machiavelli immediately springs to mind, for he was labeled 'the murderous Machiavelli' because of *The Prince*, which was read out of context and not along with his other complementary works which reveal his moral views. And to this day Machiavelli is cast in this shadow. Then there is Rousseau, who has been labeled as anti-democratic, whereas he was at pains to work out the most democratic of theories. You might not agree with him, but that is another matter. He is still regarded as having espoused a kind of 'doctrine of the inner-light', whereas writers such as Amartya Sen and W.G. Runciman, Brian Barry, and old Rhodian Robin Farquharson, have shown Rousseau to have been a really astute thinker by analysing him in the light of the theory of games.

The conservative philosopher Hegel was frequently dismissed as too jargon-ridden and metaphysical to be taken seriously whereas, while his work is indeed very difficult to interpret, there are nevertheless deep insights of great value to be found in his writings. Yet I must confess that I was trained in a tradition in which he was regarded *persona non grata*, and it was many years before I both read and taught him.

And Marx, whose theory of revolution is deeply disturbing to many, and whose economic theory is equally disturbing to capitalist economists, has had foisted upon him a version of the labour theory of value which he was at pains to reject. And yet the most celebrated of writers on Marx, such as Jerry Cohen, take it for granted that Marx espoused this theory which was in fact anathema to him. It is very important that academics be prepared to take alternative traditions seriously.

A piece of advice which it might be useful to pass on, which comes from the late J.L. Austen, the Oxford philosopher, is to read through one's writings in order to discover one's verbal habits and expressions, of which one is often largely unconscious, for they may well have significant implications of which one is unaware.

In conclusion I shall quote Professor Harold Perkins from an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March, 1970 which is as relevant today as it was then:

Universities are at once detached from and embedded in the life of society. As centres of inquiry and criticism they must stand apart from the rest of society, detach themselves from too much dependence on it, so as to be free to follow uncomfortable and unpalatable truths wherever they may lead...

While agreeing wholeheartedly with Professor Perkins, the problem lies in the funding of universities – and it is imperative that no strings be attached to their funds.